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ABSTRACT

Based on Joseph Heller's novel "Catch-22," this lesson plan presents activities designed to help students understand that active readers evaluate the actions and statements of characters in a novel; and active readers apply the ideas of a novel to contexts outside the novel. The main activity of the lesson involves students writing a paper on a historical or contemporary figure who said no to an oppressive system. It includes objectives, materials, procedures, adaptations, discussion questions, evaluation methods, extension activities, annotations of suggested readings and web links, vocabulary, and related academic standards and benchmarks addressed in the lesson plan. The lesson plan also contains a description of a video clip related to the lesson, comprehension questions related to the video clip, and answers to those comprehension questions. (RS)

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TITLE OF LESSON PLAN:
Catch-22

LENGTH OF LESSON: Two class periods

GRADE LEVEL: 9-12

SUBJECT AREA: Literature

CREDIT: Rita Ramstad, secondary language arts and social studies teacher and occasional freelance writer.

OBJECTIVES: Students will understand the following:

1. Active readers evaluate the actions and statements of characters in a novel.

2. Active readers apply the ideas of a novel to contexts outside the novel.

MATERIALS:
For this lesson, you will need:

The novel *Catch-22*
Access for students to library materials
Access for students to the Internet and to presentation software

PROCEDURE:

1. For a research activity related to *Catch-22*, focus students' attention on Joseph Heller's remark that "the only freedom we really have is the freedom to say no." Explain that while *Catch-22* effectively dramatizes a fictional instance of "saying no" to authority, the principle of resistance exists in the real world too, of course. Build on Heller's statement by quoting literary critic Robert Brustein, who once said that the character Yossarian in *Catch-22* "encouraged the rest of us [those outside the novel] to say no." Tell students that in this activity they will research a historical or contemporary figure who said no to an oppressive system.

2. Ask students to brainstorm a list of individuals whom they might research. Such a list might contain some or all of the following people:

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- Mahatma Gandhi
- Nelson Mandela
- Susan B. Anthony
- Jane Addams
- Frederick Douglass
- Cesar Chavez
- A conscientious objector during the war in Vietnam
- An activist in the abortion wars
- An individual, perhaps from the community, who participated in student or race-related sit-downs in the 1960s
- An individual in current events (such as a Miami relative of Elián Gonzalez in 1999-2000)

3. Once students have chosen their subjects, direct them to their textbooks, the library, and the Internet to do research on the individual. They can use printed sources as well as electronic texts, film or news footage, recorded protest songs, and interviews. For subjects who are still living, students may supplement their reading by arranging in-person, telephone, or Internet interviews. Whatever the source, make sure students are familiar with note-taking options and can keep track of reference materials so that they can prepare a bibliography for their research reports. Students may help one another by sharing sources, but for this project, you may want each student to generate an individual report. You may request that each report contain two parts: the first and longer part about someone who has said no, and the second part about the student's own attitude toward saying no (using "I").

4. For the first part of their reports, students should seek materials that will help them answer questions about their subjects such as the following:

- What did the subject say no to?
- How did he or she say no?
- What were the reasons or causes that led to the subject's decision to say no?
- Were his or her actions justified?
- Did those actions achieve an objective? If so, what was it?
- What did the person sacrifice or what price did the person pay to say no?
- Should the person be respected or applauded for saying no?
- For subjects who are still alive, can you find out if he or she would, given the situation, make the same decision again?
- How is your subject similar to or different from Yossarian in *Catch-22*?

Invite students to expand the list of questions.

5. For the second part of their reports, students should address personal questions, such as the following:

- How would you act in the situation that your subject was in? Why would you or wouldn't you say no?
- What alternative action(s), if any, would you have taken?

6. When students have finished their research, give them the option of submitting a written report (which might include illustrations and other graphics) to you, the teacher, or of presenting a computer-assisted multimedia report (with video and audio clips) to the class. For the latter, students might use PowerPoint or HyperStudio or other software that allows them to combine media into a slide show. Regardless of delivery preference, require that students hand in complete bibliographies of their sources.

ADAPTATIONS:

You may decide that younger students can handle *Catch-22*. In such a case, however, you may want to limit the scope of the postreading research project to one subject, whom you and the whole class will research jointly. The research can lead up to your helping students in a step-by-step way to put together a multimedia report.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. The Vietnam War made *Catch-22* an antiwar classic. How was the Vietnam War a "catch-22" situation?

2. Some critics have said that Yossarian is one of the first characters in modern American literature to fight against a powerful system. Imagine yourself in his position. Would you make the same choices he did? Why or why not? Does it make sense to fight powerful systems like the military? Can you think of any causes that might be worth fighting for?

3. According to Joseph Heller, "The only freedom we really have is the freedom to say no." Explain what you think he means by this statement; then debate its philosophical merits. Do you agree or disagree with him? Support your opinion with examples from historical and personal experience. For example, how does the above statement compare with the "just say no" catchphrase from the war against drugs?

4. Analyze the impact of Heller's choice of a satiric writing style on his novel. Would the book have been as effective if it had been written in a more serious manner? How might readers' responses to the novel have been different? Would the book have the same meaning if the style were different?

5. Would *Catch-22* have been as popular if it had been published during World War II, rather than almost two decades after it ended? How might readers' reactions to it have differed? Would it still have become a classic of American literature? Discuss how the time in which a book is published might or might not affect its success.

6. *Catch-22* is strongly critical of many societal institutions, including medicine, business, religion, government, and the military. Are Heller's criticisms still valid? How do your experiences with large societal institutions—such as the public school system, your church, your community—compare with those in *Catch-22*?

EVALUATION:

You can evaluate your students on their research reports using the following three-point rubric:

- **Three points:** extensive research; well-organized presentation; well-supported comparison/contrast of subject and Yossarian

- **Two points:** adequate research; fairly well organized presentation; insufficiently supported comparison/contrast of subject and Yossarian

- **One point:** inadequate research; disorganized presentation; incomplete comparison/contrast of subject and Yossarian

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You can ask your students to contribute to the assessment rubric by determining criteria for a well-organized presentation and a well-supported comparison/contrast.

EXTENSION:

Rewriting Catch-22

How important is setting to the effect and message of a novel? You can explore this question with your students by asking them to rewrite scenes from *Catch-22* by putting them into a different setting. Begin by having the class brainstorm a list of possible alternative settings: a school, a business, and so on. You can then ask students to consider equivalent characters for a few of the alternate settings on the list. For example, the role of Colonel Cathcart might be transformed into that of a principal or a coach in a school setting. Then divide your students into groups, and ask each group to take one scene or chapter from the novel and rewrite it as a short play. Be sure to explain that the students will need to change *all* the elements of the story in order to take it out of its military context. After the groups have written their scenes, they can perform them for the class. Then lead a discussion about whether a change in setting did or did not allow the writer to send a message similar to Heller's.

Catch-22 in the Real World of Students

Have your students critique the rules and regulations of the societal institutions that touch their lives. Begin by brainstorming a list of the institutions or systems that have an impact on them—for example, school, work, family, church, community—and then ask each student to choose one of the institutions or systems to study in depth. Ask each student to bring in a document—such as a student handbook, an employee manual, or a neighborhood association's covenants—that outlines the institution's or system's rules for functioning. (If no document exists, direct students to write down what they take to be the organization's rules and regulations.) Students should then review the rules and evaluate them for fairness and logic. Ask students for volunteers to discuss why the institutions in their lives have (or don't have) the type of illogical and unjust rules that the soldiers in *Catch-22* must live with.

SUGGESTED READINGS:

A Few Small Candles: War Resisters of World War II Tell Their Stories
Larry Gara and Lenna Mae Gara, eds. Kent State University Press, 1999.
This evocative book tells the story of the "other" heroes of World War II: those who refused to fight in it. Each chapter illustrates the personal experiences of these individuals and what they went through as a result of being war resisters.

The New Grolier Encyclopedia of World War II: The Air and Sea War
Molly Stratton, ed. Grolier Educational Corporation, 1995.
In *Catch-22,* Yossarian's aim is to enter a noncombat job. This Grolier volume describes the many aspects of noncombat duties in World War II. From intelligence to war reporting to technology, readers are drawn into the civilian world with eye-catching graphics, photos, and firsthand war stories.

WEB LINKS:

Catch 22
Web pages created by AP U.S. History class students describing the film version of Catch 22. A nice example of what students are capable of.
http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Troy/2552/main.html

World War Two on the Web
Nice collection of World War II links.
http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Oracle/2691/links.htm

World War II Aviation
The Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum is an excellent place to begin a study of aviation and Catch-22. Allied and Axis aircraft can be viewed at this site.
http://www.nasm.edu/galleries/gal205/gal205.html

Catch-22
Dr. Hart discusses the film Catch-22 directed by Mike Nichols. There are several passages from the novel and the film that should provide discussion in the classroom. This would be a great companion to the novel and the documentary.
http://chomsky.arts.adelaide.edu.au/person/DHart/Films/Catch22.html

VOCABULARY:

capitalism
An economic system characterized by private or corporate ownership of capital goods, by investments that are determined by private decision, and by prices, production, and the distribution of goods that are determined mainly by competition in a free market.

Context:
Capitalism is an economic system that allows much freedom but provides few protections.

catch-22
A problematic situation for which the only solution is denied by a circumstance inherent in the problem or by a rule.
Context:
Her parents' contradictory rules made Sarah feel as if she were caught in a catch-22.

farce
A light dramatic composition marked by broadly satirical comedy and improbable plot.
Context:
For the class play competition, the seniors wrote a hilarious farce in which the school administrators act like buffoons.

paradox
A statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true.
Context:
The team found it to be something of a paradox when the coach cut practice short because of their poor performance.

paranoia
A tendency on the part of an individual or group toward excessive or irrational suspiciousness and mistrustfulness of others.
Context:
The manager dismissed Alice's frequent complaints of harassment from other employees because he thought they were a product of her paranoia.

satire
A literary work holding up human vices and follies to ridicule or scorn.
Context:
Although satire is often humorous, writers often use it to make serious statements about societal conditions.

ACADEMIC STANDARDS:

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject Area: language arts

Standard: Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies for reading a variety of literary texts.

Benchmarks:

Benchmark: Understands the effects of complex literary devices and techniques on the overall quality of a work (e.g., tone, irony, mood, figurative language, allusion, diction, dialogue, symbolism, point of view, style).

Benchmark: Understands historical and cultural influences on literary works.

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject Area: language arts

Standard: Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies of the reading process.

Benchmarks:

Benchmark: Recognizes the effectiveness of writing techniques in accomplishing an author's purpose.

Benchmark: Identifies and analyzes the philosophical assumptions and basic beliefs underlying an author's work.

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Video Information and Comprehension Questions

Video Description
Catch-22 added a new phrase to the English language. Hear author Joseph Heller describe his own experiences inside a World War II bomber, where he developed a distaste for battle and found the perfect target for his trenchant wit.

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Download Comprehension Questions & Answers ⊙

The Comprehension Questions are available to download as an RTF file. You can save the file to your desktop and open it in a word processing program.

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TITLE OF VIDEO:
Catch-22

VIDEO COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS:

1. How did personal experience influence Joseph Heller's views about war and inspire his novel *Catch-22*?

2. What is a *catch-22*, the widely used term coined by Joseph Heller for his novel?

3. What causes Yossarian, the main character of *Catch-22*, to decide that he is not going to fly any more missions?

4. What was Joseph Heller's original title for the book, and why was it changed?

5. In addition to the military, what societal institutions does Heller criticize in his novel?

6. Which character does Heller use to represent the dangers of greed and unregulated capitalism?

7. During what period of American history did *Catch-22* become an antiwar classic?

8. What uncommon literary style did Heller utilize for *Catch-22*?

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Catch-22

VIDEO COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

1. How did personal experience influence Joseph Heller's views about war and inspire his novel *Catch-22*?
Joseph Heller was a bombardier in World War II, and the wounding of a man in his plane was a key event in the formation of his views about war.

2. What is a *catch-22*, the widely used term coined by Joseph Heller for his novel?
The term *catch-22* describes a system with a contradictory set of rules and regulations that lead to absurd and/or unjust conditions.

3. What causes Yossarian, the main character of *Catch-22*, to decide that he is not going to fly any more missions?
He becomes aware that his commanding officer is forcing his men to fly more combat missions than those in other groups for reasons that are unconnected to achieving the goals of the war, and a friend is killed during one such mission.

4. What was Joseph Heller's original title for the book, and why was it changed?
The original title for the book was *Catch-18*, but the title was changed because Heller's publisher already had a book with an *18*in the title.

5. In addition to the military, what societal institutions does Heller criticize in his novel?
Catch-22 contains criticisms of the institutions of medicine, religion, business, and government.

6. Which character does Heller use to represent the dangers of greed and unregulated capitalism?
Milo Minderbinder, the mess officer who views the war as a business opportunity, represents the negative side of capitalism.

7. During what period of American history did *Catch-22* become an antiwar classic?
Catch-22 became widely popular during the 1960s, when public sentiment against the Vietnam War was at its peak.

8. What uncommon literary style did Heller utilize for *Catch-22*?
Heller wrote *Catch-22* as a satirical farce, which is a rarely used literary form.

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